DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 220 904 CS 503 963

AUTHOR Becker, Carl B.
TITLE Philosophical Perspectives on Values and Ethics in Speech Communication.
PUB DATE Nov 82
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (68th, Louisville, KY, November 4-7, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Problems; *Educational Philosophy; *Ethics; *Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

There are three very different concerns of communication ethics: (1) applied speech ethics, (2) ethical rules or standards, and (3) metaethical issues. In the area of applied speech ethics, communications theorists attempt to determine whether a speech act is moral or immoral by focusing on the content and effects of specific speech acts. Specific areas of study include falsehood, hurtful statements, exhortations to immorality, and silence. Ethical rules attempt to tell us whether speech acts are moral by looking not at their content but rather at the attitudes and qualities surrounding the act itself. Metaethical issues involve being aware of cultural differences in speech acts without falling into the trap of relativism where no speech act is more ethical than any other. (JL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED220904

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON VALUES AND ETHICS IN SPEECH COMMUNICATION

by Carl B. Becker

Assistant Professor

Department of Philosophy

Southern Illinois University

Carbondale, IL 62901

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Carl B. Becker

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS503963

The phrase, "Ethics of Speech Communication" has recently become used in a wide variety of contexts in conferences and journal literature. Within communication ethics, we need to distinguish three very different concerns, with (1) applied speech ethics, (2) ethical rules or standards, and (3) meta-ethical issues. (1) The concern of applied speech ethics is to evaluate the morality of specific communications acts, usually based on their content and practical effects within particular situations. (2) The concern of ethical rules theory is to formulate general guidelines as necessary or sufficient conditions for ethical communication. (3) The meta-ethical concerns of communications theorists have primarily dealt with ethical relativism and the possible grounds for ethical statements and judgments. Starting with the most specific, we shall look at each of these areas, using examples from the literature to show what ground has been broken and what issues need further resolution.

(1) Applied Speech Ethics

When is a speech act moral or immoral? Communication theorists have attempted to answer this question by looking at the content and effects of specific speech acts. Let us focus on the four cases of (a) falsehood, (b) hurtful statements, (c) exhortations to immorality, and (d) silence.

(a) There is a widespread if intuitive agreement that deception is immoral. Lying is held to be wrong, both in private and public contexts--and this lying most often takes place within speech communication. The commandment dates back to the Old Testament; the controversy is reopened by popular paperbacks on the subject of lying today.[1]

1

The immorality of lying becomes more controversial where it seems to conflict with other values. There are times when preserving the feelings or "face" of a listener may be more important than the truth-value of the proposition being voiced.[2] Propositional truth also becomes a hollow conception within the realm of electronic media, where the material communicated is inherently probabilistic, graphic, and frequently untraceable to original sources. We may blame our computers for making mistakes, but hardly for lying.[3] Further, the distorted emphases and exaggerations of our advertising systems are often thought essential to our free enterprise.[4] But the boundaries between a bit of "exaggeration" and a "white lie" are by no means clear. Communications theorists can make important contributions to ethics by helping to specify the domains, conditions, and agents to which our condemnation of lying should apply.

(b) Malicious intent may often be seen within speech communication where one person deliberately uses speech to offend, harm, or humiliate another. The Chinese are not the only people to believe that offensive language is immoral. Ludwig thinks it preferable to lie than to seriously hurt someone's feelings.[5] Virulent caricatures, racial jokes, slander and libel, indeed a wide range of insults and abuse may be immoral.[6] Feinberg holds that acts which are found to be universally offensive within a community, and from which the perceiver has no escape, should be judged immoral. A more careful application of this "offense principle" to public speech situations might be another important task for communications scholars.[7]

(c) In considering exhortations to immorality, we need not debate which acts are moral or immoral; we may choose paradigmatic examples where the immorality is beyond question. Let us imagine someone publicly advocating wanton rape, torturing babies, or spontaneous unprovoked matricide. Are

his speech acts immoral only if they succeed in inciting someone to perform such offenses? Or is even the incitement (as in treason) to be ethically condemned? If a particularly violent film spawns a spate of similar crimes whose agents confess to deriving their inspiration and motivation from the film's encouragement, can we ethically condemn and censor the film? Surely in at least some cases, we must judge communication acts to be immoral because of what they cause perceivers to do.[8]

Our choices of metaphor and language also influence ethical decisions. We may advocate or condemn abortion or euthanasia by applying emotion-laden terms to clinical issues.[9] Whether we confer the label of "person" on a comatose patient may result in our ascribing or failing to ascribe to him certain human rights.[10] Sexist language may lead us to treat some humans as objects;[11] conversely, clinical language may lead us to respect otherwise groundless authority.[12] Here too may be found areas in which speech acts subtly lead towards immoral behaviour; the parameters of these situations could well be explored further by communications scholars.

(4) Silence too is part of oral communication. Our culture tends to think negatively of silence, which usually implies passive consent. But there are cultures in which silence constitutes a more aesthetically elegant refusal than an outright "no."[13] Religions such as Taoism[14] and Zen are "persistently and often violently in opposition to words and then to the intellect which deals in words."[15] Although silence in and of itself is neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy, there are clearly contexts in which it needs ethical criticism. Even in our own culture, "a false shrug of the shoulders, the seductive batting of eyelashes, or a smile may all be employed as nonverbal deception."[16]

Silence as to the derivation of one's sources is the recognized crime of plagiarism. A newscaster's silence about particular people, court cases, or battles may immorally affect their election, sentencing, or outcome.[17] A government's silence in the face of atrocities may be another immoral communication. Some may disagree with my specific examples, but the point is that communications experts may have great insights and input into these important areas of discussion.[18]

(2) Ethical Rules

Ethical rules attempt to tell us whether speech acts are moral by looking not at their content or effects, but rather by the attitudes and qualities surrounding the act itself. Ever since Aristotle, philosophers have tried to evaluate the morality of speech according to general criteria.[19] The Golden Rule and Kant's Categorical Imperative are frequently cited as ways of determining the morality of any given act, including speech acts.[20] More recently, Nilsen has tried to base speech ethics in beliefs of human worth, reason, self-determination, and self-fulfilment.[21] Habermas requires equality, competence, freedom from coercion and prejudice, authenticity (no self-deception) and suspension of privilege in his ideal communication community.[22] Fisher's "logic of good reaons" demands that the values of speech be explicit, appropriate, utilitarian, self-validated, and ideal.[23] Johannesen summarizes recent rhetoricians requirements in terms of selflessness, tolerance, self-scrutiny, accuracy, mutual openness, commitment to continuity, reasonableness, and impersonal detachment.[24] All these lists are but tentative descriptions. They may be bluntly rejected by cultures in which explicitness, logic, or individualism are de-valued.[25] However incomplete and inadequate such theories, they represent another important direction for research in the ethics of speech communications.

(3) Meta-ethical Issues: The Relativity Debate

The superficial observation that different cultures have different mores has led countless freshman philosophers from the premise that values are learned within particular cultures to the logically invalid conclusion that no values are absolute. Some speech communicators are still intrigued with the 1960's' notion that all in ethics is relative.[26] If this were true, then statements like "X is morally good," which appear to be about right and wrong, are in fact only statements about personal preferences, designed to persuade a listener that he ought to share and follow these preferences.[27]

Relativism suffers from internal inconsistency if not downright incoherence. It juxtaposes, "All statements about ethics are culture-bound and not universally true," with "This statement is not culture-bound but is universally true."[28] It should be clear, however, that truth is not the kind of thing which is arrived at by consensus, even if candidates or policies may be.[29] From the perspective of most philosophers, relativism, "is all but dead; but it still has a strong life at the popular level, where there is a tendency to act as if...moral questions cease to exist."[30]

One serious consequence of moral relativism troubles the consciences of even relativists themselves. If all values were completely culture-bound, we should be unable to criticise, condemn, or try to reduce atrocities within other cultures--or even within our own, if the subculture committing them is sufficiently different from the dominant culture.[31] Ethical relativists have neither the right nor reasons to persuade any other culture that one set of values is ethically preferable to another. This then defeats their whole enterprise in ethics. Some rhetoricians have tried to shore up relativism by turning ethics on its head--claiming that rather

than ethical rhetoric being grounded in ethical standards, ethical standards are grounded in ethical rhetoric.[32] Such a move is not only incorrect, but fails to save relativism from its fundamental failings.[33]

At this juncture, communications may fruitfully seek support from professional philosophers, who on our part are becoming increasingly interested in communication. Philosophers have developed clear defenses of the objectivity of ethical standards. Some are based on the nature of language, meaning, and truth;[34] some on the facts that all cultures do seem to share certain common values,[35] although situations may alter their priorities, and some on the "ideal communication community"[36] although this has met with some difficulties. Indeed, we can find arguments which are considered to be "good reasons" by people in a wide range of cultures.[37] Karl Apel's ethical standards: "that all (ethical) acts and omissions be a matter of ensuring the survival of the human species qua real communication community" is particularly worthy of further development.[38] And there are other values --of reducing suffering, preserving health, increasing intelligence, conserving natural environments, limiting armed conflicts, etc.--which may be found to have or at least deserve universal acceptance based on commonly held "good reasons." Defining these areas are some of the exciting frontiers open to ethicists within communications.

In sum, we need to be aware of cultural differences while formulating our ethical standards. But we need not be deterred from the attempt by the relativistic illusion that no speech act is more ethical than any other. And we need the insights of thinkers and scholars in speech communication on all three levels, of applied ethics, ethical rules, and the meta-ethical grounding of ethical language.

NOTES

[1]Sissela Bok, Lying, Moral Choice in Public and Private Life. (New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 1979).

[2]see Yuan Ren Chao, in Ben-Ami Scharfstein, The Mind of China (New York: Delta Books, 1974) p. 139.

[3]Tony Schwartz, The Responsive Chord (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1974) esp. pp. 18-22; cf. also his "Ethics in Political Media Communication" in Communication VI, 2 (1981) pp. 213-224.

[4]Theodore Levitt, "The Morality (?) of Advertising," in Lee Thayer, Richard Johannesen, and Hanno Hardt (eds.) Ethics, Morality, and the Media. (New York: Hastings House, 1980) pp. 186-196.

[5]Arnold M. Ludwig, The Importance of Lying (Springfield: C.C. Thomas, 1965) p. 5.

[6]Zechariah Chafee, Free Speech in the United States (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964) p. 101.

[7]Joel Feinberg, "The Offense Principle" in Thomas Mappes and Jane Zembaty, (eds.) Social Ethics: Morality and Social Policy (New York: McGraw Hill, 1977) pp.252-7.

[8]see Stan Deetz, "Humane Discourse, A Unitary Principle for Ethics in Interpersonal Interaction," presented to the Central States Speech Assn. Convention at Milwaukee, April 16, 1982.

[9]Daniel Callahan, "Abortion Decisions" in Mappes & Zembaty (n. 7) p. 30.

[10]Mary Anne Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion" in Mappes & Zembaty (n.7) p. 21.

[11]Robert Baker, "Pricks and Chicks: A Plea for Persons," in Richard Wasserstrom, ed., Today's Moral Problems (New York: Macmillan, 1975) pp. 152-70.

[12]Thomas Szasz, Sex By Prescription (New York: Anchor Press, 1980) p. 32.

[13]Keiko Ueda, "Sixteen Ways to Avoid Saying No in Japan: A Survey of the Function and Frequency of Japanese Patterns of Discouraging Requests," Senoir Thesis for International Christian U., Tokyo (1972) ch. VI.

[14]cf. the final stanza of the Tao-te-ching (#81): True words are not beautiful, beautiful words are not true. A good man does not argue, he who argues is not a good man.

[15]D.T. Suzuki, "Zen: a Reply to Hu Shih," in Philosophy East and West III (1953) p. 36.

[16]Ludwig, loc. cit.

[17]note the debates raging over the BBC coverage of opposition to the British war efforts in the Falkland islands, and the ethics of withholding of information from the media in wartime.

[18]The author, for one, is pleased to note an increasing rapprochement between professional ethicists with interests in speech communications and professional speech communications people with growing interests in ethics.

[19]e.g. Lawrence J. Flynn,"The Aristotelian Basis for the Ethics of Speaking" in The Speech Teacher VI, #3 (1957), pp. 179-87.

[20]Don E. Marietta, Jr. "On Using People," in Ethics, LXXXII (1972) pp. 232-8.

[21]Thomas Nilsen, in Charles Brown & Paul Keller, (eds.) Monologue to Dialogue: Exploration of Interpersonal Communication, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1978) p. 279.

[22]Jurgen Habermas, "Some Distinctions in Universal Pragmatics," in Theory and Society III (1976) pp. 155-168.

[23]Walter R. Fisher, "Toward a Logic of Good Reasons," Philosophy and Rhetoric XIII (Spring, 1980) pp. 121-130.

[24]Richard R. Johannesen, "Some Ethical Questions in Human Communications," Communications VI (1981) p. 147.

[25]cf. Momoko Nisugi, "Images of Spoken Japanese and English," and Shigeko Miyamoto, "Expressions of Criticism Within a Family, A Comparative Study of Japanese and U.S. Patterns," both senior theses for International Christian University, Tokyo, 1972.

[26]cf. Gordon Kaufman, Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) p. 119, and Shia Moser, Absolutism and Relativism in Ethics (Springfield: C.C. Thomas, 1968) p. 40.

[27]This is one famous thesis of Charles L. Stevenson, Ethics and Language (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945).

[28]cf. David Lyons, "Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence," in Ethics 86 (1976) p. 108.

[29]Earl Croasman and Richard Cherwitz, "Beyond Rhetorical Relativism" in Quarterly Journal of Speech 68, 1 (Feb. 1982) pp. 1-16.

[30]Daniel Callahan, "Abortion Decisions," in Mappes & Zembaty (n.7) p. 26.

[31]Barry Brummett, "A Defense of Ethical Relativism as Rhetorically Grounded" Western Journal of Speech Communication 45 (4) (Fall, 1981) pp. 288-293. Brummett sets up a false dilemma, both horns of which really stem from the same problem: the relativists' inability to make definite judgments about others' actions.

[32]This is the approach of Brummett (n. 31) and Fisher (n. 23); a more sophisticated approach had already been advocated by Jurgen Habermas (n. 22) and in his Communication and the Evolution of Society (trans. McCarthy) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979).

[33]as appropriately noted by Croasman and Cherwitz, (n. 29).

[34]e.g. Carl Wellman's The Language of Ethics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 299.

[35]cf. David Bidney, "The Philosophical Presuppositions of Cultural Relativism and Cultural Absolutism," in Leo Ward (ed.) Ethics and the Social Sciences (South Bend, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1950) p. 64.

[36]Hans-Georg Gadamer Truth and Method. ed. and trans. Barden and Cummings, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

[37]Wayne C. Booth, Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Assent (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) pp. 143-4.

[38]Karl Otto Apel, Towards a Transformation of Philosophy trans. Adey and Frisby (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) pp. 280-5.